



Proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge

PLANNING UPDATE #4

SEPTEMBER 1999

GREETINGS!

This is the fourth planning update from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) about the proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge (refuge). We periodically produce planning updates and mail them to local landowners, government agencies, private organizations, and others requesting to be on our mailing list. The goal of these updates is to keep you aware of our progress in establishing this new refuge.

WHAT THIS ISSUE INCLUDES

- Recap of progress to date
- Revised study area/map (page 4)
- Development of new alternative
- Revised time frame for Environmental Assessment (EA)

RECAP OF PROGRESS TO DATE

Spring/Summer 1998

The Service and its partners conducted open houses in Yolo and Solano counties to describe a proposed refuge of 8,000 acres; Made presentations and met with Yolo and Solano County Supervisors, CALFED, Delta Protection Commission, and other organizations/agencies; Received many requests from interested landowners, agencies, and organizations to revise the refuge study area; Hired Jones and Stokes Associates to analyze the socio-economic/hydrologic effects of the proposed national wildlife refuge.

Winter 1998

The Service revised the study area based on public comment; Presented four proposed refuge alternatives at open houses; Announced a new release date for draft Environmental Assessment due to the scope of the four alternatives.

WHY ESTABLISH A REFUGE?

The Army Corps of Engineers, Bureau of Reclamation, California Department of Water Resources, and other local agencies are cooperating with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish a refuge in the North Delta. The primary purpose is to restore and protect the diversity of native fish, wildlife, plants, and the habitats upon which they depend, including:

- *Sensitive habitats:* Less than five percent of tidal and seasonal wetlands remain in California. Vernal pool and riparian habitat is also imperilled. The proposed refuge would preserve and expand these habitats.
- *Species at risk:* The proposed refuge would help promote the recovery of eight federally listed species, such as the Sacramento splittail, Delta smelt, winter-run Chinook salmon, Colusa grass, and Solano grass.
- *Migratory birds:* The proposed refuge would support migratory waterfowl, shorebirds, birds of prey, and songbirds that rely up on this portion of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta for food, cover, resting, and breeding areas.

The proposed refuge will also offer a variety of wildlife-oriented recreational activities.

Summer 1999

The Service is continuing to involve agencies, organizations, and individuals to help define proposed refuge boundaries; Revising the study area; Developing a new alternative; Continuing preparation of the draft EA to comply with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and other requirements.

Winter 1999

Anticipate the release of the draft EA for a 45-day public comment period.

STUDY AREA REVISED

Since planning began, the area being considered for the proposed refuge has evolved (See map on page 4). This is part of the process of establishing a new refuge and a common outcome when soliciting public comment. The area has been revised to:

Include willing landowners: Early in the process the study area was expanded to accommodate landowners requesting that their property be included within the project. Many liked the idea of having additional options for their land.

Improve habitat linkages: The Service has had numerous meetings with the City of Davis, California Department of Fish and Game, Yolo Basin Foundation, and other organizations which support linkages between the proposed refuge and ongoing conservation efforts at Putah Creek and the Yolo Bypass Wildlife Area.

NEW ALTERNATIVE EXPLORED

The Service has received numerous public comments requesting changes in the study area that have led to the development of a new (fifth) alternative. The comments are in two areas:

Emphasize landscape linkages: The City of Davis, Department of Fish and Game, and other organizations support overlap with their conservation efforts within the study area.

Conserve prime agricultural land: The Service would like to minimize the impacts of establishing a refuge on prime agricultural land. The draft EA will address concerns regarding

potential loss of agricultural revenue within Yolo and Solano counties.

The Service recognizes the importance of landscape linkages and the socio-economic importance of farming as a way of life; the new alternative included in the draft EA will address both of these areas.

SERVICE COMMITMENTS

The Service is making the following commitments regarding establishing and managing the proposed North Delta National Wildlife Refuge:

Maintain/improve flood conveyance: The Service recognizes that an essential function of the Yolo Bypass is to convey flood waters from the Sacramento River around the Sacramento metropolitan area. The Service is committed to creating and managing a project that is flood neutral or better. That is, proposed management actions will not impair the ability of the bypass to continue to provide flood protection. The draft EA will assess hydrologic effects of the proposed refuge and identify measures to maintain or improve conveyance of flood waters, if necessary. Prior to implementing major restoration projects, the Service will conduct hydrologic modeling and consult with the State Reclamation Board as part of NEPA compliance.

No increase in reclamation district member costs: The Service may acquire property from landowners who are currently assessed fees for levee maintenance, or water delivery or drainage services. If this occurs, the Service will assure that the remaining reclamation district members do not incur increased costs as a result of refuge management. We will strive to be good neighbors.

No impact to water supplies: When restoring and/or managing lands for wildlife and refuge

purposes, the Service will use practices which do not reduce water availability for others in the study area. However, the Service may seek transfers of water from willing parties to support management activities.

Continue agricultural land practices: The Service intends to establish cooperative farming and grazing programs on portions of the refuge. Grazing will remain an essential management tool for enhancing grasslands. Wildlife-friendly agriculture will also continue as an important element of the refuge.

Willing seller policy: According to our established policies, the Service will acquire interest in properties only on a willing seller basis, based on appraisals of fair market value. Depending on landowner preference, the Service may secure interest in lands through acquisition of fee title interest, or conservation or agricultural easements; signing cooperative agreements; or partnering in various technical assistance programs. In other words, landowners within the approved refuge boundary can continue their normal operations unless *they* wish to work with the Service.

WHEN IS DRAFT EA EXPECTED?

The size and configuration of the study area has been expanded and modified from 8,000 acres originally, to 47,000 acres. A new alternative that addresses agricultural concerns and emphasizes habitat linkages is also being evaluated. Each of these changes requires an expansion of the type and breadth of data that must be collected for the draft EA.

The Service now expects to release the draft EA during winter 1999. All individuals, agencies, and organizations on the mailing list will receive a letter announcing the release date and location and dates of public meetings. The release date

will also be publicized in newspapers and on the Internet. This will be a draft document. We will accept your comments for 45 days after its release and consider them in preparing the final document.

HOW TO RECEIVE PLANNING UPDATES

If you wish to be added to our mailing list, just call, write, or E-mail your request to us. The Planning and Realty offices have recently moved to the Federal Building in Sacramento. Stone Lakes NWR is still located in the same office:

"The Service is committed to creating and managing a project that is flood neutral or better."

John Castellano, USFWS Planner

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